

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-07

INFO OCT-01 SS-14 ISO-00 NEAE-00 SP-02 H-01 INR-05
INRE-00 CIAE-00 NSCE-00 SSO-00 PA-00 (ISO) W
-----045823 072106Z /45S

O R 091726Z MAR 78
FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1776
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 3 TEL AVIV 3183

LIMDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PGOV, PINR, IS
SUBJECT: BEGIN UNDER PRESSURE: HOW WILL HE REACT?

REFS: (A) 77 TEL AVIV 7162 (NOTAL)V (B) TEL AVIV 1528 (NOTAL)

1. SUMMARY: THE ACTIONS OF PRIME MINISTER BEGIN, WHAT
WE HAVE ALREADY WITNESSED AND WHAT WE CAN EXPECT IN
THE FUTURE, PROBABLY REFLECT CERTAIN BASIC PERSONALITY
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TRAITS. HIS IS ESSENTIALLY A LONELY POSITION. THIS
LONELINESS IS SHARPENED BY HIS SENSITIVITY TO GROWING CRITICISM
FROM (FORMER) SUPPORTERS. HE VIEWS
THE WORLD ABOUT HIM FROM A VERY PAROCHIAL PERSPECTIVE,
WHICH IS HEIGHTENED BY HIS FIXATION ON THE TRADI-
TIONS OF JEWISH HISTORY, WITH ISRAEL BEING THE CROWN-
ING ACHIEVEMENT OF THAT HISTORY. HE PERCEIVES PROBLEMS

THROUGH A LEGAL PRISM, WHICH OFTEN LEAVES HIM INCAPABLE OF APPRECIATING THE TRUE SHAPE OF THE LARGER PICTURE. WE BELIEVE THESE CHARACTER TRAITS WILL BECOME INCREASINGLY EVIDENT AS BEGIN PERCEIVES HIMSELF TO BE UNDER GROWING PRESSURE FROM SADAT, THE US, AND HIS OWN COUNTRYMEN, AND WILL ADD TO HIS INTRACTABILITY AS A NEGOTIATOR. END SUMMARY.

2. IN SEVERAL RECENT CABLES, WE HAVE REVIEWED AND REASSESSED A NUMBER OF CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS IN ISRAELI POLITICAL LIFE. IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS, HOWEVER, IT WILL BE MENACHEM BEGIN WHO MUST MAKE THE FINAL DECISIONS ON THE MOST CRUCIAL AND DIFFICULT QUESTIONS CONFRONTING ISRAEL. TO PARAPHRASE TRUMAN: THE BUCK STOPS WITH BEGIN. THIS CABLE WILL THEREFORE CONCENTRATE ON THOSE PERSONALITY TRAITS WHICH, IN OUR JUDGEMENT, WILL HAVE A HEAVY INFLUENCE ON THE WAY BEGIN REACTS TO BOTH THE STRESSES OF HIS INTERNAL POLITICAL SITUATION AND THE STRAINS OF NEGOTIATIONS. IN THIS SENSE, IT WOULD BE READ IN CONJUNCTION WITH OUR MESSAGES AT THE END OF SEPTEMBER AND IN LATE JANUARY (REFTELS). TAKEN TOGETHER, THEY MAY HELP BOTH TO ANSWER THE QUESTION OF WHY THERE HAS BEEN AN APPARENT STIFFENING IN BEGIN'S POSITIONS IN RECENT WEEKS, AND TO ASSESS HOW HE MAY RESPOND TO THE INEVITABLE PRESSURES OF THE WEEKS AHEAD.

3. POLITICAL LONELINESS. AS PRIME MINISTER, BEGIN FINDS
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HIMSELF IN A LONELY POSITION. BUT HIS IS NOT JUST THE USUAL LONELINESS OF A NATIONAL LEADER. HE HAS FEW CRONIES IN HIGH POSITION AND HE APPEARS TO HAVE NO ONE IN THE CABINET (EXCEPT PERHAPS LANDAU) WITH WHOM HE CAN RELAX. HIS COLLEAGUES IN THE CABINET ARE NOT HIS OLD FRIENDS. MANY OF THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN HIS CLOSEST POLITICAL ASSOCIATES DO NOT AGREE WITH HIS PRESENT POLICIES AND HAVE, IN FACT, OPENLY CRITICIZED HIM. THIS ISOLATION LEADS TO AN INABILITY TO DISCUSS IDEAS INFORMALLY AND--COUPLED WITH BEGIN'S AUTOCRATIC NATURE--LEAVES HIM INCLINED TOWARD DECISIONS WHICH OFTEN ARE NOT SUFFICIENTLY STAFFED. IT IS ESPECIALLY SURPRISING, IN A SYSTEM AS COLLEGIAL AS ISRAEL'S, TO FIND THE PRIME MINISTER SO ALONE.

4. PAROCHIALISM. IN COMMON WITH MANY OF HIS COUNTRYMEN, BEGIN SUFFERS FROM A PAROCHIALISM THAT DISTORTS HIS UNDERSTANDING OF BROAD INTERNATIONAL PROBLEMS AND TRENDS. THIS WAS A TENDENCY WE HAD NOTED IN OUR ANALYSIS OF HIM LAST SEPTEMBER AND WE FIND LITTLE REASON TO CHANGE THAT ASSESSMENT BASED ON HIS PERFORMANCE TO DATE. HIS EXTENSIVE TRAVELS SINCE BECOMING PRIME MINISTER--INCLUDING

TO EGYPT--HAVE APPARENTLY HAD LITTLE IMPACT IN BROADENING
HIS UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONSTRAINTS AND PROBLEMS FACED
BY OTHER LEADERS. RATHER, HE APPEARS TO HAVE RETAINED
THE NARROW OUTLOOK OF ONE BORN AND BRED IN THE WOMB OF
ONE OF THE SMALL JEWISH COMMUNITIES OF EASTERN EUROPE;
THE INTERVENING YEARS HAVE DONE LITTLE TO CHANGE HIS PER-
CEPTION OF BEING SURROUNDED BY A HOSTILE WORLD. AS A
RESULT, HE TENDS TO SEE THREATS WHERE OTHERS MIGHT SEE
OPPORTUNITIES. HIS INABILITY TO UNDERSTAND THE POSITION
OF OTHERS--AND PARTICULARLY,JUST NOW, OF EGYPTIANS--WILL
BE A SERIOUS IMPEDIMENT TO HIS SEARCHING FOR OR ACCEPTING
COMPROMISES. BEGIN SEEMS TO HAVE EVEN LESS ABILITY THAN

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INFO OCT-01 SS-14 ISO-00 SP-02 H-01 INR-05 CIAE-00
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-----037695 091957Z /45S

O R 091726Z MAR 78
FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1777
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
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LIMDIS

MOST ISRAELIS TO SENSE OR TO COMPREHEND ARAB FEELINGS. BEGIN WILL REMAIN SEVERELY HANDICAPPED IN THIS RESPECT UNLESS HE HEEDS THE ADVICE OF SOME OF HIS CABINET MEMBERS WHOSE HORIZONS ARE SOMEWHAT BROADER.

5. JEWISHNESS. BEGIN IS A RELIGIOUS MAN, WHO CONSIDERS HIMSELF TO BE THE REPRESENTATIVE AND DEFENDER OF THE JEWISH NATION. HOWEVER, HE IS LESS A DEVOUT JEW WHO OBSERVES THE FULL COMPLEX OF ORTHODOX RITUAL THAN HE IS A TRADITIONALIST, I.E., A JEW WHO SUBSCRIBES TO RE-
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LIGIOUS VALUES AND THE CENTRALITY OF RELIGIOUS TRADITION TO JEWISH LIFE. MORE THAN WITH HIS PREDECESSORS IN THE PREMIERSHIP, EVEN BEN-GURION, HIS JEWISHNESS AND HIS SENSE OF ISRAELI NATIONALITY ARE NOT SEPARATE ASPECTS OF HIS PERSONALITY BUT OVERLAP ENTIRELY.

6. STEEPED IN JEWISH TRADITION, HE SEES HIMSELF NOT MERELY AS A POLITICAL LEADER, BUT AS A JUST AND WISE MAN, A PATRIARCH AND A MAN OF AUTHORITY PRESIDING OVER HIS PEOPLE. HE THUS BELIEVES THAT HE HAS A QUASI-RELIGIOUS ROLE TO PLAY. HE WAS REINFORCED IN THIS VIEW OF HIMSELF BY THE INTERNATIONAL ACCEPTANCE AND RECOGNITION WHICH HE RECEIVED FOLLOWING HIS ELECTION AND THE SAY A DIVIDED COUNTRY SUDDENLY RALLIED BEHIND HIM.

7. THIS METAPHYSICAL SIDE OF BEGIN HAS LED SOME INFORMED OBSERVERS HERE TO DEVELOP AN ENTIRE THESIS IN EXPLANATION OF HIS BEHAVIOR. ACCORDING TO THIS VIEW, BEGIN TAKES A MYSTICAL-ALMOST A MESSIANIC-- APPROACH TO HIS RESPONSIBILITIES. HE VIEWS HIS ELECTION VICTORY AS THE ULTIMATE VINDICATION OF THE POSITIONS HE HAS ALWAYS ESPOUSED AND OF HIMSELF AS AN INSTRUMENT CHOSEN TO SAVE THE LAND OF ISRAEL FROM THOSE WHO WOULD BARTER IT AWAY. HE IS STEEPED IN HIS OWN SENSE OF SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS, AND THIS MAY EXPLAIN THE SEVERAL "MISUNDERSTANDINGS" IN WASHINGTON AND ISMAILIA--HE HEARS ONLY WHAT HE WANTS TO HEAR REGARDLESS OF WHAT IS SAID, AND HE WANTS TO HEAR ONLY WHAT FITS HIS PRECONCEPTIONS. THE SUSPICION THAT HE MAY HAVE ONE EYE ON THE HISTORY BOOKS IS PROBABLY RIGHT, BUT SHOULD NOT BE TAKEN AS CAUSE FOR OPTIMISM; THE BOOKS HE CARES ABOUT ARE NOT THE FANCY WESTERN TEXTS ON CONFLICT RESOLUTION THROUGH COMPROMISE, BUT RATHER THE HISTORIES

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OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE, IN WHICH IT WILL BE WRITTEN THAT HE, MENACHEM BEGIN, RENDERED PERMANENT THE SAFETY OF THE JEWS THROUGHOUT THE LAND OF THEIR FATHERS. THIS UNSETTLING PROFILE OF A MAN DRIVEN BY A MYSTICAL SENSE OF MISSION IS ONE THAT HAS GAINED CURRENCY OVER THE PAST SEVERAL MONTHS AND IT CANNOT BE LIGHTLY DISMISSED.

8. SENSITIVITY TO CRITICISM. TO A SURPRISING DEGREE--SURPRISING BECAUSE HE HAS BEEN IN POLITICS ALL HIS ADULT LIFE--BEGIN DOES NOT EASILY OR GRACEFULLY ACCEPT CRITICISM. HE FINDS IT PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT TO ACCEPT CRITICISM FROM HIS OLD COLLEAGUES. HE OFTEN APPEARS TO BE A LEADER WHO IS TRYING DESPERATELY TO HOLD ON TO HIS OLD CONSTITUENCY AND DOES NOT YET SEEM AWARE THAT HE PROBABLY CANNOT MAKE PEACE WITH THE ARABS AND KEEP HIS OLD FRIENDS TOO. HOWEVER, THE FACT IS THAT ATTACKS FROM WITHIN HIS PARTY ARE MORE PAINFUL TO HIM PSYCHOLOGICALLY THAN POLITICALLY. TO A CERTAIN EXTENT, THESE OLD FRIENDS ARE RELATIVELY UNIMPORTANT IN THE POLITICAL SENSE; THE OPPOSITION OF GEULA COHEN AND MOSHE SHAMIR DOES NOT POSE A SERIOUS POLITICAL THREAT TO BEGIN--SHARON IS A DIFFERENT STORY. BEGIN NEVERTHELESS APPEARS UNABLE TO MOVE AWAY FROM HIS COLLEAGUES EVEN WHEN SHEDDING THEM MIGHT MAKE GOOD SENSE POLITICALLY.

9. THERE ARE TWO PARTICULAR ASPECTS OF THIS SUSCEPTIBILITY TO CRITICISM WHICH HAVE BEEN NOTED IN RECENT WEEKS. BEGIN CAN BE EXPECTED TO REACT VIGOROUSLY WHEN HE BELIEVES HIS INTEGRITY HAS BEEN CALLED INTO QUESTION BY ANOTHER GOVERNMENT--AS EXAMPLES, THE ARGUMENT WITH SADAT ABOUT WHAT WAS SAID IN JERUSALEM REGARDING DEMILITARIZATION OF THE SINAI AND, OF COURSE, THE DISAGREEMENT WITH THE WHITE HOUSE OVER WHAT WAS OR WAS NOT PROMISED REGARDING ISRAELI SETTLEMENT ACTIVITY. IT WILL BE IMPORTANT FOR US TO REMEMBER IN ANY NEGOTIATING SITUATION THAT QUESTIONING HIS RECORD OR RECOLLECTION

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OF WHAT HE HAD SAID ON AN EARLIER OCCASION WILL NOT BE PRODUCTIVE. (HIS OWN MEMORY IS LEGENDARY). WE CAN EXPECT THAT HE WILL CONTINUE TO BE TERRIBLY SENSITIVE TO PERCEIVED RENEGING ON "PLEDGES" OR "UNDERSTANDINGS".

LEWIS

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O R 091726Z MAR 78
FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1778
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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (TEXT)

10. ANOTHER ASPECT OF THIS SENSITIVITY TO CRITICISM
IS HIS EFFORT TO BE AS POPULAR AS POSSIBLE. BEGIN HAS
CONTINUED TO MAKE HIMSELF AVAILABLE TO A SURPRISING
NUMBER AND RANGE OF VISITORS, BOTH FROM ISRAEL AND FROM
ABROAD. (SOMEWHAT SURPRISINGLY, HOWEVER, HE NO LONGER
IS SEEN IN OTHER PLACES AROUND THE COUNTRY; ALMOST ALL
OF HIS PUBLIC APPEARANCES ARE IN JERUSALEM.) HE SEEMS
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NEVER TO MISS AN OPPORTUNITY TO MEET WITH A GROUP IN ORDER TO EXPLAIN HIS VIEWS AND PLEAD HIS CAUSE. THIS IS AT LEAST PARTLY A FUNCTION OF HIS CONTINUING STRONG BELIEF IN THE VALUE OF ORATORY - HE IS OBVIOUSLY PERSUADED THAT HE CEC CONVINCE ANY AUDIENCE OF THE CORRECTNESS OF HIS VIEWS GIVEN ENOUGH TIME. THUS, HE CLAIMED IN GOOD FAITH TO HAVE BEEN SURPRISED BY THE REACTION TO HIS TOAST AT THE STATE DINNER ON JANUARY 17--HE FELT HE WAS EXPLAINING ISRAEL'S POSITION TO AN INTERESTED AUDIENCE AND, AT THE SAME TIME, ANSWERING KAMEL'S ARRIVAL STATEMENT.

11. ADDICTION TO LEGALISM. ANOTHER PERSONALITY TRAIT IS BEGIN'S VIEW OF THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LAW. HIS RELIANCE ON LEGALISMS AND INTERNATIONAL LAW STEMS FROM HIS WORLD VIEW IN WHICH RIGHT AND WRONG ARE CLEARLY DISTINGUISHABLE. LEGAL PRECEDENT AND INTERPRETATIONS ARE USED TO SUPPORT ISRAELI LEGITIMACY AND DEVELOP THE JUSTICE OF ISRAELI POSITIONS. HIS LEGALISTIC APPROACH TO FOREIGN POLICY ISSUES IN REFLECTED IN THE CONTINUED RELIANCE UPON LEGAL ADVISORS; WE NOTE THE INCLUSION OF ATTORNEY-GENERAL BARAK IN THE WASHINGTON DELEGATION. WE SHOULD ANTICIPATE HIS CONTINUED USE OF LEGAL ARGUMENTS IN OUR DISCUSSIONS WITH HIM AND LEGALISTIC RESPONSES TO AMERICAN AND EGYPTIAN PROPOSALS WILL APPEAR TO FOCUS ON PRECISE WORDING RATHER THAN ON BROAD POLITICAL FORMULATIONS.

12. POLITICAL INDECISIVENESS. FUZZY GOVERNMENTAL DECISIONS (OR NO DECISIONS AT ALL) IN SETTLEMENTS POLICY AND ACTIVITIES IN RAFAH AND SHILO HAVE DAMAGED BEGIN'S CREDIBILITY AS A FORCEFUL AND STRAIGHTFORWARD LEADER. HE APPEARS TO HAVE CONVENED THE CABINET DISCUSSIONS OF SETTLEMENTS POLICY ONLY AFTER IT BECAME OBVIOUS THAT CONFIDENTIAL

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THIS DAMAGE HAD BEEN DONE. HIS GOVERNMENT HAS A POOR LEGISLATIVE RECORD IN THE KNESSET, AND AS LEADER OF THE COALITION, BEGIN BEARS THE POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR THIS RECORD. ON SOME ASPECTS OF THIS LEGISLATIVE PERFORMANCE, SUCH AS THE BILL AGAINST PROSELYTIZING AND THE LAW REGARDING EXEMPTION FROM MILITARY SERVICE FOR RELIGIOUS GIRLS, HE HAS GIVEN IN TO INTEMPERATE ELEMENTS IN HIS COALITION. ON OTHER ASPECTS, SUCH AS SHILO AND THE CASE OF THE HOREV REPORT FOR THE ABOLITION OF THE IMMIGRATION AND ABSORPTION MINISTRY, HE HAS SHOWN AN INABILITY TO FACE DIFFICULT DECISIONS. THE LACK OF COURAGEOUS POLITICAL LEADERSHIP CAN ONLY HAVE AN UNFAVORABLE IMPACT ON HIS CONDUCT OF PEACE NE-

GOTIATIONS.

13. MILITARY HERO WORSHIP. FINALLY, BEGIN HAS A FONDNESS AMOUNTING ALMOST TO HERO WORSHIP FOR SUCCESSFUL GENERALS AND OFTEN REFERS TO THE PRESENCE OF FIVE IN HIS CABINET. THIS MAY REFLECT HIS NOSTALGIA FOR THE DAYS WHEN THE FEARED IRGUN MARCHED TO HIS COMMAND. IN ANY CASE, HE SPEAKS OF SHARON AS THE GREATEST MILITARY LEADER OF THIS GENERATION AND SHOWS GREAT RESPECT FOR THE MILITARY JUDGMENT OF WEIZMAN AND DAYAN; HE SHOWS LESS RESPECT FOR YADIN, WHO WAS CHIEF OF STAFF BUT NEVER A FIELD COMMANDER.

14. IN CONCLUSION, THESE PERSONALITY TRAITS ARE LIKELY TO HAVE THE EFFECT OF MAKING BEGIN EVEN MORE INTRACTABLE AND INTRANSIGENT AS PRESSURE ON HIM INCREASES, OR EVEN AS HE MERELY PERCEIVES THAT PRESSURE TO INCREASE. ESSENTIALLY ALONE, NOT CORRECTLY UNDERSTANDING OR ASSESSING THE OPINIONS AND VIEWS OF OTHER WORLD LEADERS, FEELING ABANDONED BY HIS OLD FRIENDS AND UNABLE TO ACCEPT CRITICISM FROM THEM OR FROM OTHERS, BEGIN WILL RELY INCREASINGLY ON LEGALISMS AND HIS OWN NARROW EXPERIENCE. HIS JUDGMENTS AND DECISIONS ARE LIKELY TO BE LESS CAREFULLY THOUGHT OUT AND LESS BASED ON BROAD
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POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS THAN THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SITUATION WOULD WARRANT. IN THE WEEKS AHEAD, PRESSURE MAY BE CONSIDERED NECESSARY IN ORDER TO INDUCE MOVEMENT FROM BEGIN, BUT THAT SAME PRESSURE WILL LIKELY HAVE THE EFFECT OF ONLY MAKING HIM MORE DIFFICULT IN NEGOTIATIONS.
LEWIS

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: Z
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: PRIME MINISTER, POLITICAL STABILITY, POLITICAL LEADERS, INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENTS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 09 mar 1978
Decaption Date: 20 Mar 2014
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978TELAV03183
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780151-0358, D780106-0838
Format: TEL
From: TEL AVIV
Handling Restrictions:
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780385/aaaacuik.tel
Line Count: 421
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: a3584cca-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: LIMDIS
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 8
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: LIMDIS
Reference: 77 TEL AVIV 7162, 78 TEL AVIV 1528
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 25 may 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3381056
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: BEGIN UNDER PRESSURE: HOW WILL HE REACT?
TAGS: PGOV, PINR, IS, (BEGIN, MENAHEM)
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/a3584cca-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014